



The Celtic Heritage of the Old South

by Grady McWhiney

Southerners are not like other Americans. Significant cultural differences have always separated them from the North. Even today cultural variations between Southern black and white people are fewer than those between white Southerners and white Northerners. In other words, the population of the United States is more divided culturally along regional lines than along racial lines, and studies indicate that cultural diversity between Southerners and Northerners is greater than that between manual and nonmanual workers, city dwellers and country people, Protestants and Catholics, and males and females. Furthermore, such cultural disharmony has divided the South from the North for more than three hundred years.

Fundamental and lasting divisions between Southerners and Northerners appeared during the colonial period, when migrants from the Celtic regions of the British Isles—Scotland, Ireland, Wales, Cornwall, and the English uplands—planted their traditional ways in the Old South.

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From this solid 18th-century base in the Southern backcountry, Celts and their descendants swept westward decade after decade throughout the antebellum period until they had established themselves and their anti-English values and customs across the South. By the end of the antebellum period, people of Celtic heritage far outnumbered the combined total of all other white Southerners, and their traditional culture dominated the region. The antebellum North, on the other hand, was settled and influenced principally by people who had migrated from the English lowlands. Cultural differences between Northerners and Southerners shaped the course of antebellum American history and ultimately exploded into the War for Southern Independence, a conflict that was not as much brother against brother as culture against culture.

Neither the North nor the South, of course, was completely homogeneous in culture. Not every Yankee habit or trait was English, any more than every Rebel habit or trait was Celtic. Slaves, certain planters, and some townsfolk and professional people claimed no Celtic heritage, but the overwhelming majority of Southerners adopted Celtic traditions, just as most Northerners practiced English ways.

In examining the Celtic heritage of the Old South, it is important to recognize that only those cultural traits associated with British Celts up to the 18th century are relevant. There are two reasons for this: first, all significant migration from Scotland, Ireland, and Wales to the American South ended before 1800; and second, long-standing English efforts in Britain to acculturate the Celts began to force a number of important changes in Celtic ways during the latter part of the 18th century.

Among the most fundamental attributes that Celts brought to the Old South were those rooted in their system of social organization, language, and means of livelihood. The first two, the clans and the Gaelic and Brythonic tongues, had been considerably eroded in the United Kingdom and were nearly extinct by the end of the 18th century. Neither trait was freely transplanted in America, yet each left an indelible imprint on the South. The third, the traditional Celtic means of making a livelihood by raising animals, became central to the Southern way of life.

The clans—which traditionally had provided group identification and established lines of authority that preserved order and settled grievances—did not make the Atlantic crossing, but habits born of centuries of living in clans did. Throughout the antebellum South the principal social unit was not the nuclear family but the extended family, comprising large numbers of people with close or distant blood ties along with genetically unrelated “uncles” and “aunts” and cousins by the dozens. Even plantations tended to be so organized, and among middle-class and poorer whites the extended family was nearly universal. Nor has the system entirely disappeared in the 20th century.

The legacy of the clans also endures in attitudes toward authority. Clansmen never sought redress of a grievance in the courts or through legislative enactments; instead, they appealed to the clan chieftain or his lieutenants. This habit was rooted early and deeply in the South. When Southerners had a problem with government or the law, their resort was not to the courts but to a protector—whoever had the necessary influence or power. Even today, among rural Southerners, the courtroom is so alien that when they speak of “the law” they refer to the sheriff or the police.

The influence of the language, though less direct and tangible, was no less significant. Among other things, language interacts with and reinforces social norms that can persist even after the language itself has changed, and so it was with Celtic Southerners in at least two important respects. One had to do with social control. Some anthropologists distinguish between societies governed by the “guilt principle” and those governed by the “shame principle,” England being a prime example of the first and the Scottish Highlands and Ireland being prime examples of the second. The Englishman was conditioned to internalize his sense of proper behavior—even when sailing alone across the sea or when stranded among heathens, he was always proper, for God and conscience were watching. The Celt, by contrast, had no faith in the slender reed of inner discipline, relying instead upon social disapproval, mainly in the form of ridicule; significantly, Gaelic is a hundredfold richer in its terms of derision than is English. Yankees adopted the English way; Southerners the Celtic way.

The other carry-over from the language was subtler yet.

Though Irish became a standardized written language fairly early, both Irish and British Celtic were more suitable as spoken than as written languages. So, too, with the people: Celts and Southerners, unlike Englishmen and Yankees, were oral and aural. They loved raucous and lively music—fiddles, clogging, reels, and jigs. They loved making noise for its own sake. Above all, Celts and their Southern descendants loved words and the sounds of words. They loved oratory, from the stump or the pulpit; they loved to tell stories, the more outlandish the better; they loved to talk, even when they had nothing to say.

The most crucial characteristic that Celts brought with them to America, however, was their method of raising animals for a livelihood and an associated disdain for the drudgery of tillage agriculture. Herding is not popularly associated with either Celts or Southerners, yet traditionally Celts were a pastoral people and so were Southerners. The value of Southern livestock, mostly hogs and cattle, during the antebellum period was greater than the value of all the Old South's tillage crops combined.



The ways of Southerners, like those of their Celtic ancestors, frequently shocked observers. “They are a wild race, with but little order or morals among them,” claimed one Yankee. “They are indolent, devoted to raising cattle, hunting, and drinking whiskey.” “They are profane, and excessively addicted to gambling,” said another.



The Southern method of raising livestock was a continuation of traditional Celtic herding, and the vast rich spaces of the Old South provided an easy existence. Animals were rarely tended; instead, they were marked or branded to indicate their ownership and turned loose to forage. Southern land laws, from the earliest colonial times until the 20th century, legalized open-range herding and ignored English common law. Crops in the South could be fenced, but otherwise animals were free to graze the land of anyone and everyone, rich and poor alike. Once a year, in the fall, surplus animals were rounded up and driven to market.

Unlike Yankees and Englishmen, who were compulsive plowers and often obsessed with agricultural improvements, Celts and Southerners cultivated crops reluctantly and haphazardly. They rarely used fertilizers, and their primitive techniques appalled outsiders. Many Southerners disdained tillage agriculture as fit only for slaves and Yankees, preferring instead to live off their livestock and work as little as possible.

Some of the characteristics that contemporary observers attributed to both Celts and Southerners, in addition to those already described, included living leisurely and indulging the sensual pleasures. Celts and Southerners, whose values were more agrarian than those of Englishmen and Yankees, wasted more time, rarely read or wrote, consumed

more liquor and tobacco, and were less concerned with the useful and the material.

Critics damned the British Celts, calling them "drinkers and gamblers," "remarkably lazy," "adverse to industry, never working but from necessity," and "holding that bodily labour of all sorts was mean and disgraceful." One observer charged that the Irish would "sit upon their hams, like greyhounds in the sun, and work not one jott." Reportedly "a drunken kind of people," whose "propensity for intoxication has been remarkable from the earliest times," Celts also used "great quantities of tobacco in all its forms," and were much addicted to swearing and fighting.



Southerners, contemporaries claimed, possessed these same characteristics. "They are a wild race, with but little order or morals among them," claimed a Yankee. "They are indolent, devoted to raising cattle, hunting, and drinking whiskey." Southerners "only work two days in the week, and keep holiday the other days," reported a traveler. Typical white Southerners, identified by a contemporary as "the hardy descendants of the early Scotch and Irish settlers," were "good horsemen, marksmen, and hunters, but are not remarkable for agricultural industry. They are squatters rather than farmers." Moreover, he concluded, "they will not work." The wife of a Southerner insisted that her husband "would not take a house or live in one, lest he should have to work." Even Confederate General Robert E. Lee admitted: "Our people are opposed to work. All ridicule and resist it."

After living in the South, a Northerner concluded that all Southerners, white and black, resisted toil. "A neighbour of hers owned fifty cows, she supposed, but very rarely had any milk and scarcely ever any butter, simply because his people were too lazy to milk or churn, and he wouldn't take the trouble to make them." Slaves, she said, were as lazy as their masters: "Folks up North talked about how badly the negroes were treated; she wished they could see how much work her girls did. She had four of them, and she knew they didn't do half so much work as one good Dutch girl such as she used to have at the North."

The ways of Southerners, like those of their Celtic ancestors, frequently shocked observers. "They are profane, and excessively addicted to gambling," explained a Yankee. "This horrible vice prevails like an epidemic. Betting and horse-racing are amusements eagerly pursued, and often times to the ruin of the parties." Gambling frequently led to quarrels, noted an observer, "which are sometimes ended by the pistol." Visitors frequently com-

plained about the "roughness" and "wickedness" of Southern society, and the addiction of Southerners to tobacco and spitting.

Drinking, which most Southerners relished, often led to violence. "The men of the South," insisted a visitor, "are sudden and quick to quarrel. The dirk or the pistol is always at hand. Fatal duels frequently occur." Southerners were never pacifists. "The darkest side of the Southerner is his quarrelsome ness, and recklessness of human life," wrote a wayfarer. "The terrible bowie-knife is ever ready to be drawn and used on the slightest provocation." The martial spirit, which Southerners shared with their Celtic ancestors, remained strong in the South.

Despite their violence and indolence, Celts and Southerners offered hospitality that few people could match. Even some of the most critical travelers praised the warmth with which Celts and Southerners received them. It was customary in both the Celtic areas of the British Isles and in the antebellum South to overwhelm people with hospitality, to encourage them to eat, drink, and enjoy themselves; it also was traditional in both places, as an 18th-century Scottish lady explained, "to please your company." Travelers praised the kindness of Southerners, who were "ever ready to welcome the wayfarer to their hospitable firesides." "If you are disposed to be convivial," noted a traveler, "you may dine with some one every day." "They welcomed us to everything," said one man.

Their casual attitude toward life made Celts and Southerners less materialistic—less oriented toward the making of money—than most folk. Premodern Celts boasted that they coveted no wealth; as pastoralists and warriors, they "despised" trade and what they called "mercenary Employments." Showing her contempt for money, an 18th-century Scotswoman, in the words of her debtor, "lighted her pipe with the note I gave her for the money I owed her." A Yankee observed that Southerners "are more reckless of the value of money than any people that I have seen." He also noted that wealth impressed Southerners less than it did most other people. Another visitor insisted that there was "no part of the world where great wealth confers so little rank, or is attended with so few advantages, [as in the South]." Still another man contended that Southerners coveted dogs more than money.

Another characteristic adopted from the Celts was the informal and rural ways of Southerners. Visitors reported that most people in the South lived unpretentiously in carelessly built cabins. A traveler described a typical Southern home as one "ventilated on an entirely new principle; that is to say, by wide cracks in the floor, broad spaces between the logs that composed the walls, huge openings in the roof, and a window with a shutter that could not be closed." Southern roads and bridges—where there were any—were as poorly constructed and maintained as those in premodern Scotland and Ireland. Such was the case, one man claimed, because Southerners were "extraordinarily indifferent to practical internal improvements."

Both Celts and Southerners spent much time outdoors. Expert marksmen and anglers, they enjoyed hunting and fishing. Fast horses and dogs were as much a part of their lives as hogs and cattle. One antebellum traveler dined on venison and trout brought in by "two little fellows that

looked almost too small to shoulder a gun." Another visitor in the Old South counted 13 "guns hung up along the rafters" of a two-room log cabin.

Southerners were not "bookish." Formal education meant less to them and their Celtic ancestors than learning to master their natural environment. The Southern woman described by a traveler as "sitting with a pipe in her mouth, doing no work and reading no books" would doubtless have agreed with the Southern man who, when asked by a Yankee if he liked to read, replied: "No, it's damn tiresome." It has been said, only partly in jest, that more Southerners wrote books than read them.

Neither Celts nor their Southern descendants regarded their ways as unusual or reprehensible. The laziness and lack of ambition that good Englishmen and Yankees considered deplorable were viewed differently by traditional Celts and antebellum Southerners. They delighted in their livestock culture and their comfortable customs. To them being lazy did not mean being indolent, shiftless, slothful, and worthless; it meant being free from work, having spare time to do as they pleased, being at liberty, and enjoying their leisure. They saw no point in working when their livestock would make their living; they thought anyone who worked when he did not have to was crazy. Nor did they see any reason to have more than they could eat, or drink, or wear, or ride. Unlike conscientious Englishmen or Northerners, when Celts and Southerners said they were being lazy, they were not reproaching themselves, but merely describing their state of comfort. They suffered no guilt when they spent their time pleasantly—hunting, fishing, dancing, drinking, gambling, fighting, or just loafing and

talking.

These are not the characteristics that make great empires, and no Celtic society ever made one, but the Celtic-Southern way has two redeeming virtues. First, when outsiders supply the discipline and constancy, Celts are capable of mighty achievements, as British history has shown. Even under the unimaginative rule of England, the Irish and the Welsh produced an almost endless number of poets and playwrights, actors and musicians; and the Scots, for more than two centuries, kept the United Kingdom supplied not only with its best fighting men but also with its most brilliant philosophers, physicians, scientists, and engineers. The Celtic contribution in America has been no less profound.

The other virtue may be more valuable. We are finally beginning to realize that modern industrial society, for all its material benefits, was purchased at a staggering cost in the form of alienation, depersonalization, regimentation, and bureaucratization. Southerners knew that all along; they resisted the building of such a civilization. And in their traditional life-style there is a lesson that others might profit from, a lesson having to do with orienting your life toward leisure rather than toward achievement. Perhaps it is better to go hunting and fishing than to work nine-to-five in an office or a factory. Perhaps it is more important to visit and talk with friends and family than to get the job done. Perhaps it is more rewarding to know the joys of dreaming and bragging than to know the frustrations and heartache of attempting to accomplish. As a 20th-century American the author has been conditioned to believe otherwise, but as a born and bred Celt Southerner he suspects that he is wrong. ◇